

# Raising the Writer's Awareness in the Large Class

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This paper presents a combination of a questionnaire and a workshop as an alternative to conferencing and reformulation for raising the student writer's awareness of the process of writing. This is especially pertinent to a large class where it is not easy for the teacher to give his/her students much individual attention. Therefore, the teacher must show ways that efficiently present the "general" features of the process of writing, including the strategies of revision which encourage the learner to think about the nature of his/her own writing process. This first step in the direction of learner autonomy encourages the student to develop new strategies for writing as well as for rewriting.

Writing is considered to be a critical and mutually benefiting interaction between the cognitive and physical processes which gives the text its particular form (Perl 1980, Sommers 1980, Zamel 1983). Evidently, the nature of the interaction, to a large extent, determines the nature of the text. This awareness becomes a prerequisite for becoming a good writer. Two frequently recommended activities for students to acquire an awareness are conferencing and reformulation (Chandrasegaran 1986 and Leki 1990, Goldstein and Conrad 1990, and Allwright 1988).

Ideally, these activities are most helpful because the learner receives a good deal of individual attention. However, these are practical only in a class of about twenty students, plus or minus five. But, when there are fifty or more students, with varying degrees of "proficiency," who need to be "taught writing" and "in English" the teacher needs to think of alternatives. In a situation as limiting as this, it is imperative for the teacher to find a realistic and practical alternative to "conferencing," if the goal is not "martyrdom."

I have found that in a large class, administering questionnaires is a practical and useful way to raise the learner's awareness. A questionnaire has, primarily, two advantages. First, it helps me reach out to everybody. Secondly, it gives me an opportunity to sift out the interested students from the uninterested ones. Despite previous classroom discussions that essentially emphasized the usefulness of such a questionnaire in "raising their antennae," there are always students who do not return the questionnaire. Incidentally, during the discussion sessions, the learners and I discuss the questions to minimize the possibility of misunderstanding and confusion.

The questionnaire (see appendix 1 below) I use with undergraduate students in the ESL classroom is administered after they write their first academic essay. Although I make a few general remarks on organization, relevance, development of details, and the appropriateness and accuracy of their English, I barely make any corrections on their grammar.

When the questionnaires are returned I look through them and return them to the students. Then, in class, we discuss the main themes of the questionnaire: The various aspects of a written text, the concerns of individual writers, and their need for feedback on the different aspects of their

writing. As we discuss their responses together, one student writes the observations on the board. Generally the class notices that, although each writer has his/her own concerns in writing, there are certain features (organization, content, style), which characterize each written work.

This questionnaire is followed by a workshop on revision whose aim is to make the learner aware of the need for evolving strategies to assess his draft and revise it accordingly. I use the first and second drafts of a reasonably good piece of writing of one of my students, from an earlier batch, for this purpose.

The workshop has two parts. The first part draws the learner's attention to "why" he needs to revise his writing. The second part explains "how" it can be done. During a discussion with the learners on why they revise their writing, I list their reasons on the board. These include clarity, to develop ideas, to avoid repetition, to take a stand, etc. Then copies of their two drafts, are distributed among ten groups of five students each. The groups discuss the changes, trying to focus on the reasons behind them, and their effect on the piece of writing. For instance, the details that support a point may be changed during revision. Some details may be totally dropped, yet, some others may be shifted from the first paragraph to somewhere in the third. In other words, strategies such as shifting content, adding, deleting details, and modifying linguistic details, serve to raise the learner's awareness of the writing process.

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## Appendix 1

### Appendix 1

#### The Questionnaire

Dear Student

We have read the story of Socrates and learned how he realized why he was wiser than others. He knew what he did not know. This awareness allowed him to pursue his learning in the right direction. More often than not, we do not even know what we need to know. This results in an uncomfortable feeling of being unequipped and inadequate. So, to begin with, I would like you to start thinking about how you write because you need to improve your writing skills. This questionnaire will guide you.

1. First, I would like to know what kind of writing you do in English. Please rank the frequency of the following by ticking:

**O** for often   **S** for sometimes   **R** for rarely.

Academic (essays, applications, etc.,)  
Social (letters, invitations, etc.,)  
Creative (stories, articles, etc., )

O	S	R

2. We need to confront a number of aspects in producing a good piece of writing in English. Some of them are listed below. Rate them in the order of:

**V** for very important   **I** for important  
**S** for somewhat important

Organization  
Development of ideas  
Language use/Grammar  
Vocabulary  
Appropriate style  
Other

V	I	S

3. How do you rate yourself as a writer, with reference to academic writing? Pick one.

Good \_\_\_\_\_ Not bad \_\_\_\_\_ Poor \_\_\_\_\_

4. Please indicate how well you think you can cope with the following areas. Choose between:

**A** for Adequately **S** for Strongly

Vocabulary  
Language use/grammar  
Organization  
Developing ideas  
Style

5. To improve your academic writing better, which of these areas do you need to improve? Rank the following according to:

**S** for Somewhat **L** for Lots **No** for not much

Language use/grammar  
Vocabulary  
Organization  
Developing ideas  
Other

6. English teachers usually write comments on their students' papers. Try to remember the comments your teachers wrote on your papers or essays. Indicate the ones which applied to you.

Language use/grammar  
Vocabulary  
Punctuation  
Spelling  
Organization  
Development of ideas

7. In which of the following areas, would you most like the teacher's feedback (comments) ? Tick (4)no more than two.

- o Vocabulary
- o Language use/grammar
- o Development of ideas
- o Organization
- o Style

8. Imagine you need to write three drafts every time you write an essay. You will receive feedback (teacher's comments) on the first and second drafts so that you may revise them and produce the third/final draft. Would you like the comments on both your language use (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) and organization (content, coherence, style, etc.) to be on the same draft or separate drafts?

Language: Same draft \_\_\_\_\_ Separate drafts \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: Same draft \_\_\_\_\_ Separate drafts \_\_\_\_\_

9. Answer this, only if you have ticked separate drafts for question 8. On which draft would you like the teacher's feedback on your language use?

\_\_\_\_\_ First draft \_\_\_\_\_ Second draft

10. How do you prefer the feedback on your paper:

- ☐ Questions
- ☐ Suggestions
- ☐ Corrections

11. Continuing with question 10, please give the reasons for your preference?

a. Usually, when we write something we are happy with some parts and unhappy with others. It may be an idea we have expressed, or it may be the way we have conveyed it. Can you, after writing the essay and before submitting it, identify the parts you are satisfied with?

\_\_\_\_\_ Most of the time \_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ Never

b. We may feel, we need to modify a sentence or convey an idea in some other way. Can you identify the areas you are dissatisfied with?

\_\_\_\_\_ Most of the time \_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ Never

Thank you very much. You've been extremely helpful to me.